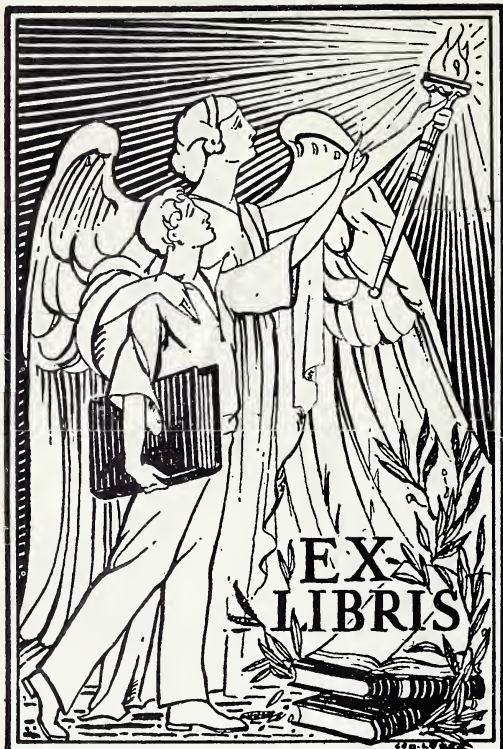


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by  
Margaret P. Montague  
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## SOMETHING BIG, LIKE RED BIRD

BY MARGARET PRESCOTT MONTAGUE

### I

'GEE!' Red Bird complained, 'I don't see what it had to go an' rain on a *Sunday* afternoon for!'

'Just — just when we was goin' over to the Big Spring, too,' Jimmie Little's rather wavering voice piped in. 'An' — an' I was goin' to git 'em to put me somewheres where I could n't hit nobody, an' then I was goin' to throw rocks, an' — an' throw rocks, an' *throw* rocks, just *all* the afternoon.'

The very thought made him twist his little blind face from side to side in excitement. 'Just Jimmie' he always asserted that he was. 'Cause — 'cause, you know,' he was wont to explain, 'I was raised in the Poor House down in Lupin County an' never heard 'em say who my folks was, an' they never *did* call me nothin' but just Jimmie.'

Looking at his very small and wizened person of eight years, his hearers might have been tempted to doubt the ability of the Lupin County Poor House to grow little blind boys, whatever else they might 'raise' successfully there.

He and Red Bird, another blind boy, whose real name was George Washington Morris, and who was Just Jimmie's running mate and adored hero, were seated by the open window of the boys' sitting room at Lomax, the State school for deaf and blind children, and were listening to the purr of the spring rain in the courtyard, and to the monotonous slip-slop of the dripping eaves.

'Shall I read to you?' suggested Miss Lyman, the matron for the blind boys, who happened upon them just then, and was struck by their dejected attitudes.

'Is it sump'n 'bout fightin'?' Red Bird demanded with a languid interest.

'Oh, yes! A book full of fighting,' she promised; and, taking them up to her room, she unlocked the doors of romance for them with the magic key of the *Boys' Froissart*, and after the reading was over she told them, from her memory of an old quaintly illustrated copy of the original, how the Bishop of Lincoln and certain gallant gentlemen had resolved to wear a black patch over one eye until they should have performed some deed of chivalry. At that Red Bird's imagination blazed up.

'Jimmie, let's you an' me do it!' he cried. 'Let's you an' me wear patches like the Bishop of Lincoln an' them other fellas 'til *we've* done sump'n noble, too!'

'Let's!' Jimmie assented joyfully (he always assented to everything Red Bird proposed). 'But, Red Bird, we got to wear our patches over our y'ears.' (Just Jimmie's ear was always prefixed by a *y*.) 'Cause — 'cause course there ain't no sense in *our* wearin' patches over our *eyes*!'

'An' we got to have a beautiful lady to sort of pay our deeds to,' his running mate added.

This gave them pause until Red Bird suggested Miss Lyman.

'Aire — aire you the fairest lady in the land?' Jimmie demanded in Frois-

sart diction, somewhat flavored by Lupin County.

Miss Lyman hastily denied any such distinction.

'Course she'd *say* she was n't,' Red Bird reproved Jimmie. 'Let me feel,' he added imperiously.

With a butterfly touch his fingers quested her smooth plump cheeks, her hair — which was indeed very soft and thick — and her crisp and fresh Sunday blouse; also he sniffed the general clean fragrance of orris-root, and pronounced the whole good.

'Well,' he said, 'you may n't *look* pretty, but *we* don't care nothin' 't all 'bout that so long as you *feel* pretty.'

Thus she was accepted as their liege lady, and at their request accoutred them with their patches. And if the patches were made from the tops of the fair lady's discarded stockings — Oh, well, it is a rude reality that stares too closely at romance.

Of course Red Bird was the first to get his patch off, though even he wore it for a week.

He and Jimmie came nightly to Miss Lyman's room to have her review their day's record, and see if there was anything in it sufficiently noble to justify the removal of a patch. That is to say, they reviewed Red Bird's. Just Jimmie never appeared to have anything remarkable to show on his own account, but he could become almost lyrical over Red Bird's achievements. They were both sure Miss Lyman would unpatch the latter the day he fought and licked Edward Saunders, a boy almost two years older than Red Bird. Strangely enough, however, she did not. She even went so far as to assert that, as Edward had merely stumbled over Red Bird's foot by accident, she would have considered it more worthy the removal of a patch, had Red Bird refrained from the licking. And the boys were forced to admit in private

that even the fairest ladies had strange ideas.

But at last Fate favored Red Bird.

He was up in the blind boys' dormitory one day at play-time. Spring was in the air and the window was open. Red Bird went over to it to feel the wind on his cheeks, and to listen to the myriad sounds which the playground gave up: the shouts and laughter of the blind children; the slurring scuffle of a company of deaf boys marking time as they drilled in the brick courtyard below; and from around on the girls' side the plaintive notes of little Phœbe West's horn. As he leaned there he turned a large orange — a windfall from his friend Mr. Heartwell, the deaf baker of the school — in his hands, essaying little tentative nibbles at it, and trying to make up his mind as to the most delightful way of eating it. Should he bite a hole in it then and there and suck it dry? Or should he peel it, divide it into segments, and, hunting up Jimmie, do the generous thing and divide it with him? Or again — sudden and delightful inspiration — suppose he induced Jimmie to invest that penny he had been hoarding so long, in a stick of lemon candy, and then they would share the orange, imbibing it through the candy, suck and suck about, a linked sweetness long drawn out? Fired by this plan, he was just turning away, when something came avalanching down the roof and brought up in the wide gutter just outside his window. Red Bird jumped back. It was so near, so strange. What could it be?

'Who you?' he demanded backing farther away.

There was no answer, but there was the sound of scrambling feet against the tin of the gutter, accompanied by certain alarming grunts and puffs.

'Who you?' Red Bird repeated more sharply.



The scuffling and scrambling seemed very near, and the friendly sounds of the playground very far away. He was just turning to scuttle off downstairs to the safe companionship of the other boys, when he bethought him of his patch. Would the Bishop of Lincoln and his gallant friends have run away, even from a puffing creature that they could not see, and that would not speak? Not likely. Again he approached the window.

'Lady,' he said, 'see here your knight who will not fail to die for you.'

For, of course, the sounds *might* be made by a damsel in distress, and that was the way Sir John of Hainault had addressed the fugitive Queen of England. Red Bird said the words very fast, half under his breath, for, of course, there was always the chance of its being a grown-up who would n't understand, and who might laugh.

If it were a distressed lady she should answer as the Queen had to Sir John, 'Sir, I find in you more kindness and comfort than in all the world besides.'

Red Bird strained his ears for these flattering sentences. They failed to come, but suddenly, in the courtyard below, someone screamed piercingly. "*Look!* Oh, my goodness! Look at that little deaf boy up there in that gutter! He'll fall — he'll break his neck!"

There followed the frantic sound of running feet, but they were two flights of stairs away, and any moment that little boy, who was n't more than six years old, might miss his footing and — the courtyard three stories below was paved with brick.

'Here you —' Red Bird cried plunging wildly for the window. Immediately, he heard the child edging out of reach along the gutter. Goodness! that was no way to go about rescuing him! Then a sudden inspiration flashed upon Red Bird. How he came to think of it he never knew. He

said afterwards that sump'n sort er snapped in his head, and that was as near as he ever came to explaining it. He approached the window cautiously and held out the tempting orange. The deaf child did not move, this time. Red Bird put the orange to his lips and made as if to eat it, then held it out again, and now he heard the little boy scuffling slowly nearer. At his back he felt the room full of tense grown-up watchers.

'That's right, Red Bird, that's right,' Mr. Lincoln's voice encouraged him.

Gradually, as he heard the little boy approach he withdrew farther into the room, and at last with a final puff and scramble the child climbed over the sill and jumped down to safety, his eager hands upon Red Bird's orange.

The grown-ups swooped forward and caught him fast, and Mr. Lincoln's hand fell upon Red Bird's shoulder.

'Good boy!' he cried in a somewhat shaken tone. 'Good boy!'

That night Miss Lyman held a party in her room to celebrate the removal of Red Bird's patch. The party was small but very select. The invited guests were Red Bird, Just Jimmie, W-on-the-Eyes, and the little rescued deaf boy. The latter had not the slightest idea of what it was all about, and not having yet learned to talk, he could not ask questions. W-on-the-Eyes was the sign by which Charlie Webster, a little deaf boy of ten, was known to all the other deaf children of the school. He was invited because Benny Adams — the explorer of the gutter — was his especial charge, Benny's mother having intrusted him to Webster when she sent him to school. Ever since his arrival, Webster, and indeed the whole deaf department, had found their hands full. He was as likely to appear on the ridge-pole as in the schoolroom, and he had thrown the whole corps of matrons into a state of consternation

and wild telephoning to doctors by calmly eating a moth-ball. Like the Elephant's Child in the *Just So Stories*, by Kipling, he suffered from an 'insatiable curiosity'; and not being able to voice any of his questions, when touch and sight failed, he very naturally had recourse to taste for the furtherance of his inquiries. Doubtless the eating of the moth-ball satisfied his mind on that point at least. Probably also he had derived further information from his explorations that afternoon of the roof and gutter outside the blind boys' dormitory.

Charlie Webster made on his behalf a very beautiful speech of thanks to Red Bird. He had to make the speech on his fingers, but Red Bird felt his hands and understood some of his signs, and Miss Lyman interpreted the rest for him. Altogether it was a great occasion. Everybody's heart overflowed with good feeling and good cheer, and Just Jimmie, who had nearly burst with pride over his hero's achievement, burned to imitate him. He might have taken his patch off over and over again for proficiency in his lessons; but this he scorned to do. To his mind there was nothing romantic in being able to spell conscientious, or in repeating the names of all the presidents in order. For its removal that patch called for the romantic and gallant; or, as he himself put it, 'some kind er fightin', or 'sump'n *big* like what Red Bird done.'

## II

There came at last, however, a heavenly warm spring Sunday, when one of the teachers, assisted by a couple of pupils who could see a little, took all the blind boys over to the Big Spring, — a long happy ramble through the perfumed woods, — and when the desire of Just Jimmie's heart in the matter of throwing stones was realized.

They placed him by the side of a creek, which afforded an unlimited supply of stones, and where there was a clear space ahead with no danger of hitting any one, and here he did indeed throw rocks, and throw rocks, and *throw* rocks, just all the afternoon. It was pure joy, but finally even his devoted arm gave out. He cuddled down on the bank to rest 'jus' er minute' as he specified to himself, but in reality to fall fast asleep. He had dropped down, as it happened, behind a fallen tree, so that the teacher, when she came to gather her flock together, failed to see him, and supposed he was on in front with Red Bird. And so, when Just Jimmie sailed up to consciousness once more, the woods were still and deserted and he knew himself all alone. In the general scramble of life, however, he was rather used to being overlooked. If he philosophized about it at all he probably put it down to the score of his having no folks, and coming from the Lupin County Poor House; moreover, he had found that, given time, people usually remembered his existence. Therefore he had no doubt that some one would presently return for him. In the meantime, this out-of-door world still lent a delightful warmth to his small body, and brought intoxicating spring perfumes to his nostrils. Also, here were the stones and the creek again, with his good right arm refreshed by sleep, and the heart of Just Jimmie asked no more. Sometimes the stones went into the deep water with a full round 'plup'; sometimes they landed in the shallows, making a pleasant sharp splash; sometimes — oh, joy! — they flew clear across the creek and greeted the ear with a delightful clip-clap, as they skipped on the stones on the other side; and each time Jimmie jumped up and down, and clapped his hands and gave vent to extraordinarily gleeful shouts of merriment.



All at once he heard a crackling sound in the bushes behind him, and knew that somebody, or something, stood there and looked at him.

After listening a moment, as no one spoke, he took the initiative.

'Aire you a cow or a person?' he demanded.

It seemed to him that the breathing was more human than animal, so he was not surprised when he heard a man's laugh. But it was the strangest laugh Jimmie had ever heard. Just the sound of laughter, with no mirth to back it.

'Do I look like a cow?' a voice demanded.

'I dunno,' Just Jimmie returned. 'I ain't so very sure what a cow looks like. I ain't seen one — not since I was two weeks old — an' course a fella don't recollect so awful well as fer back as that.'

'Have n't seen a cow since you were two weeks old!' the voice exclaimed.

'No,' said Jimmy simply, 'I ain't seen nothin' since I was that old.'

In his desire to explain he turned his little thin gray-mouse face, with its blind eyes, more fully in the other's direction, and the voice cried 'Oh!' sharply. And then after a moment it said 'Oh!' again, softly this time. 'What are you doing out here all alone?' it asked after a moment.

It was a man's voice, Jimmie was sure of that, but it had a queer uncertain throb in it, that he found very disconcerting.

'I was asleep,' he explained. 'An' — an' so the fellas went off an' lef' me. I reckon they thought I was somewhere with Red Bird.'

'But you can't stay here alone. Where do you live?'

'I'm at Lomax. That's where all the deaf an' blind kids goes to school,' Jimmie explained. 'It's 'bout two miles from here, I reckon.'

'I'll take you back,' said the man. 'I'll *have* to take you back. The other can wait.'

He seemed to be arguing something out with himself.

'Oh, you need n't to bother if you have sump'n to do; they'll send back for me after a while,' Jimmie assured him.

'No — no — I'll take you,' the other returned in that nervous jerky way of his.

Jimmie was conscious of a certain odor which he had encountered in times past. Also, when he cuddled his hand sociably into the big one that closed on his, he found that, warm as the day was, and large as the hand was, the fingers nevertheless were cold and damp, and clung to his, moreover, in a desperate, twitchy way that almost hurt. Somehow the clutch of those fingers, for all that they were so big, waked a curious protective feeling in Just Jimmie. He did not know how to express it, how to say that he was sorry, nor indeed what there was to be sorry about; but some instinct infinitely older than his eight years made him endeavor, as it were, to fling a corner of his own mantle of happiness about the other and so protect him — though what there was to protect him from, again he did not know. But as they went their way, he began a long rambling discourse on what a fine day it had been; how nice it was to be in the woods and throw stones; and how he liked the spring; and at last, inspired by his own eloquence, he drew a deep luxurious sniff of sheer contentment, and the perfume-laden air rushed through his little body and into his very soul, and 'O Gee!' cried Just Jimmie happily, 'I certainly *am* glad I'm erlivin'!'

Again the man laughed, another of those sudden explosions that had no sound of laughter.

'Glad you're living!' he cried wildly. 'Glad you're living! I wish to God I was dead!'

'Oh, *that's* just 'cause you're gittin' over er drunk,' Jimmie assured him cheerfully.

The man dropped his hand. 'Good Lord!' he whispered, and Jimmie could feel his startled eyes upon him. 'Good Lord!' Then, 'What do *you* know about that?' he demanded.

'Oh, I smelt it on you!' Jimmie returned, crinkling his nose. 'An' there was a fella at the Lupin County Poor House — that's where I was raised — allus used to say gittin' drunk was all right if it was n't for the blue blazes next day. He said that was — was — Well,' he caught himself up, 'it's er word Mr. Lincoln don't 'low none of us boys to use, but — but,' — with sudden inspiration — 'I'll *spell* it for you.'

Carefully his fingers formed certain letters of the manual alphabet, which he had picked up from the deaf children.

'Is that first letter an H?' the man asked.

'Yes, an' it's er E when you put your hand like this.' (Jimmie illustrated.) 'An' you make a L —'

'I can guess the rest,' the man broke in hastily.

'Well, that's what the fella used to say it felt like next day,' Jimmie concluded.

Suddenly the man's hand fell hard upon Jimmie's shoulder and his face stooped close to his.

'Little pal, don't *you* get drunk,' the shaky voice implored. 'You would n't find anything so nice again, not ever again; you — you might n't even like to be alive — not even on spring days when you could throw stones.'

'Oh, I won't,' Just Jimmie promised easily. 'That fella at the Poor House, he give me er drink onct, but I did n't

like it. Red Bird an' me, we don't keer nothin' 't all 'bout whisky.'

'Thank God for that!' said the man. 'If there is a God,' he added.

'Why, *course* there's er God,' cried Just Jimmie, even his tolerant little soul shocked by such a display of sheer ignorance.

He told Red Bird afterwards that that man was the 'funniest fella he ever *did* see.'

'How do you know there's a God?' the other demanded.

'Why — why, I've knowed *that* ever since I was nothin' but a little old kid. A old nigger woman at the Poor House, she told me all erbout God.'

'And of course she knew,' the man returned.

'Oh, yes; she knowed all right,' Just Jimmie agreed. 'She did n't know so very much else, but my O! she certainly did know er heap erbout God.'

'Perhaps I've known too much else,' the man said, half to himself, and his voice sounded more discouraged and far away than ever. 'So you were brought up in the Poor House?' he asked after a moment.

'Yes,' said Jimmie. 'They found me when I was a baby just throwed erway 'longside the high-road, sorter — sorter you know, like folks does with little dogs an' — an' cats they ain't got no use for — an' they never did call me nothin' but just Jimmie, 'cause I did n't have no folks. But — but,' he went on with breathless eagerness, 'I know er boy that's got *three* names. All the fellas calls him Red Bird, but that's just a kind of a nickname, 'cause he comes from a place called Red Bird. His real name's George — Washington — Morris' (Jimmie pronounced the words impressively), 'an' — an' he's got folks, too. Folks 'at sends him postcards. Why, *his* folks they'll send him er postcard — why — why most *any* day.'



And then his favorite topic of Red Bird thus gracefully introduced, Just Jimmie's small tongue ran happily away on a long eulogy of his friend. Once the man interrupted him to ask about the patch over his ear, and that gave him a chance to tell of his hero's extraordinary feat, and how he, too, burned to do 'sump'n *big* like Red Bird.'

The man vouchsafed almost no comments; but he held fast to Jimmie's hand, and at last they came to Lomax.

'I — I guess maybe I'd better tell Mr. Lincoln I'm back,' Jimmie said, conscientiously.

The man said he would like to see Mr. Lincoln, too, so they went into the study together. Jimmie liked to go there. The place always held a warm atmosphere of friendliness, and moreover, he liked the smell of books, and the pleasant whiff one got of typewriter ink, and other exciting smells which always conveyed so much to his keen little nose.

He could not, of course, see anything of what passed between the two men, but he heard it all.

'I found this little chap out in the woods all alone, and so I brought him home,' the strange man said in that queer shaky voice of his.

And after Mr. Lincoln had thanked him he went on again. The words seemed hard to say, and indeed every now and then they stumbled and fell away altogether into silence.

'He and I had a little talk and — and' — here the voice failed temporarily — 'and I'd like you to take *this*.' (Jimmie knew that something was changing hands.) 'Look out! it's loaded,' the man added sharply. After a moment the words picked up their difficult way again. 'There is n't — is n't any reason for my asking you to take it except — well, there is n't any one else for me to give it to, and somehow

I wanted to give it to some one — I thought I was down and out — A lot of things had happened.' (Jimmie could hear him swallow chokingly.) 'Those woods seemed as good a place as any to do it in. They — they were —' the voice stopped altogether for a moment — 'they were quiet, and nobody would recognize me round here — I'd have dropped out without bothering any one — and then — *then* I came on this little chap — and — he thought I was a cow!'

The voice collapsed suddenly into laughter — that strange wild laughter of his. 'He said he did n't recollect so very well what a cow looked like — he said he had n't seen one' — Jimmie could hear the man swallow — 'had n't seen one — since he was two weeks old — He came from the Lupin County Poor House — and — and he said he was glad he was alive.' The voice went out abruptly, and when the words came again they were barely more than a whisper. 'I guess if — if Just Jimmie finds it so good to be alive — a fellow like me — ought n't to — to quit.'

'Why, no; I should think not,' Mr. Lincoln's voice acquiesced after a moment.

'If I had n't come on him throwing stones out there in the woods, in half an hour I'd have been — well, been nowhere, or — or everywhere — whichever it is. But now — well, while Just Jimmie plays the game so well, I'll not fling down my hand.'

There was a short silence, and then the man went on again.

'He's wearing that patch over one ear until he has performed some gallant deed.' (The voice was still shaky, but Just Jimmie thought this time there was a hint of real laughter in it.) 'I — I think it might come off now.'

'Yes,' Mr. Lincoln agreed. 'Yes; I think so too. Suppose you take it off.'

'But — but — but I ain't done *nothin'*,' Just Jimmie broke in suddenly, backing away. 'Red Bird's done sump'n, an' — an' — an' —' he was on the verge of tears over his disappointment — 'an' I wanted to do sump'n *big* like fightin' or — or sump'n like what Red Bird done.'

But the man went on fussing with his twitching fingers over the knot that secured the patch, and paying no attention whatever to Jimmie's outburst. And at last the latter's very small ear emerged.

'Why, *this* ear's all stuffed up with cotton! I don't believe he can hear a thing with it!' the man cried.

'*Course!*' said Just Jimmie, 'it would n't be no *sense* to wear a patch if you did n't stuff up your y'ear too.'

'Did Bird Red have cotton in his ear?' Mr. Lincoln demanded.

'Why — why — why — why, maybe not,' Jimmie stammered, torn between truth and loyalty.

'No eyes, and no folks, and only about the size of my fist, and yet he was willing to sacrifice one ear! While I — Great Heavens!' the man burst out.

'I ain't done nothin'!' Jimmie picked up his almost tearful complaint. 'It — it — ain't anything to spell, an' — an' know 'rithmetic, an' presidents' names. I want to do some kind of *fightin'* — or — or sump'n *big* like —'

Suddenly he was swept up into arms that held him convulsively.

'You tell Red Bird you've done the

biggest kind of fighting to-day,' the man cried, almost roughly.

For an instant Jimmie was held fast. Then he was set down again, and Mr. Lincoln put him out into the hall and shut the door so promptly that Jimmie was never sure what the sounds were the strange man was making then; only they made him feel shivery and glad to snuggle up close to Red Bird who was waiting outside.

'Gee! that was a awful funny man,' he confided to the latter. 'Yes, sir! he certainly was funny, but,' he added tolerantly, 'somehow I kinder liked the fella.'

But there was nothing in what he could tell Red Bird of the afternoon's adventure to warrant the man's assertion that Jimmie had done the biggest kind of fighting, and the boys put the statement down as just one more evidence of the 'awful funniness of the fella.' And why Just Jimmie's patch had been removed neither of them had the least idea.

But a queer thing began to happen. Every week after that, Jimmie received a postcard, just like the children who had fathers and mothers.

'Why — why,' he announced joyfully, 'Why, Red Bird, seems like I've got folks, too!'

'Just *one* person don't make folks,' Red Bird retorted.

'Well — well, maybe I ain't got folks like *you*, Red Bird, but — but anyhow I got *a* folk,' Just Jimmie amended happily.





